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ABSTRACT

In the past 20 years, the percentage of married women in the Canadian labor force has risen dramatically. Despite women's increased participation in the labor force, child care and housework are still largely done by women. While the difficulty of combining work and family responsibilities can result in work/family conflicts, a variety of strategies can be employed to manage such conflicts. Some strategies involve the type of employment a parent chooses while the children are young. Often strategies employed by women for managing work/family conflicts include: working part-time rather than full-time while the children are young, choosing work that can be easily obtained or left, working at home, and choosing shift work so that one parent is always available to care for the children. Other strategies involve continuing to work full-time, but spending less time sleeping or in leisure activities, reorganizing gender roles to share housework and child care more equitably, and alleviating role strain by having no children or fewer children. While legislative changes and workplace and family negotiations also can be used to alleviate work/family conflicts, the present economic climate makes such changes and negotiations difficult. Unions and employees' associations will have to negotiate leave packages or flexible working hours instead of higher wages. In addition, voters need to make their governments aware of the extent of work/family conflicts and the consequences of not dealing with them. (NB)

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WORK/FAMILY CONFLICTS: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Introduction

Most demographers project that the birth rate will continue to decline in the near future. A major reason for the decline is the difficulty of combining work and family life in today's society. Full-time employment and caring for children in the evenings and on weekends is tiring for parents, especially for mothers who do most domestic work. Furthermore, children are increasingly costly in urban environments.

In the past twenty years, the percentage of married women in the Canadian labour force has risen dramatically. Among those aged 25 to 44, for example, about 75 percent were working for pay in 1989 compared to only 48 percent in 1975 (Labour Canada, 1990:21). Statistics Canada noted that 62 percent of all husband-wife families were "dual-earner" families in 1986 compared to 34 percent in 1967 (Moore, 1990:162). Family structure has changed significantly because two incomes are increasingly needed to counteract rising costs.

Changes in the Division of Labour in Families

In the past fifty years, women's roles have undergone a major transition while men's have reacted and adapted to changes in women's lives. Men may now be freer to remain in school, search for more interesting work or develop leisure pursuits because pressure has been taken off them to be the sole breadwinner in their family. As gender roles change, men may also have the opportunity to express their emotions more honestly and

overtly and to develop closer relationships with their children. At the same time, however, husbands are expected to do more housework and child care and to consider their wife's employment when making decisions.

When wives work full-time in the home, the potential for conflict is reduced as the division of labour is often firmly established (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1988). The division of labour most often needs to be negotiated when the wife re-enters the labour force after years as a homemaker, requiring family members to adapt to her schedule and her husband to consider her job in his decisions. Harrell (1985), for example, found that employed wives are less willing than housewives to move with their husband's job. In addition, studies have indicated that employed wives are more likely to make demands on their husband to share the housework and that husbands respond by doing slightly more routine housework than the husbands of homemakers (Harrell, 1985; Asner and Livingstone, 1990; Marshall, 1990).

These results suggests that wives who work for pay increase their bargaining power in intimate relationships because their money may be critical for household expenses. The relationship between family power and wives' earnings is not clear, however, partly because most husbands earn considerably more money than their wives (Labour Canada, 1990).

Despite employed wives' increase in bargaining power, researchers have found that child care and housework are still largely "women's work". For example, the 1986 Social Survey by

Statistics Canada contained questions on household chores, including meal preparation and clean-up, indoor and outdoor cleaning, laundry, home repairs and maintenance, gardening, pet care, bill-paying, travel to and from these household chores, but excluding child care. The survey concluded that while full-time homemakers devoted about four hours a day to housework, women with jobs outside the home are also largely responsible for housework. On a given day, 83 percent of working women did housework, spending about 2 1/4 hours. In contrast, half of working men (including single men) did household chores and they devoted an average of 1 3/4 hours. Housework patterns for married people were even more divergent: 89 percent of women compared to 51 percent of men did housework that day (Marshall, 1990:19).

A study by the Conference Board of Canada, of 11,000 working Canadians, found that women employees reported that they did an average of 16.5 hours of home maintenance work per week, while men reported 9.8 hours (MacBride-King, 1990:9). Although some men indicated that they shared the care and nurturing of their children, women tended to carry most of the responsibility. Over three-quarters of the women reported that they had the majority of responsibility for making child-care arrangements while only 4.1 percent of men responded in this way. Women were also four times more likely to report that they stayed home from work when their children were ill.

The MacBride-King study reinforces other research that mothers tend to be the parent to take children to sitters or

child care centres and to fetch them in the evening. Other research indicates that this is done even though women have less access than their husbands to the family car (Michelson, 1985). In the MacBride-King study, employed mothers were also far more likely than fathers to attend school interviews, assist children with homework, help organize their social and cultural activities, and to be active in child care co-operatives. When calculating the feasibility of child care arrangements, the mother's workplace and wages were often deciding factors. Despite the fact that child care should be a family concern, couples often considered that fees would be deducted from the mother's pay. If fees approximated the value of her wages, it was considered not worth the cost and aggravation for her to be employed.

Research has also confirmed that two or more child care arrangements are common in the same family, even for one child (Lero, Pence, Goelman and Brockman, 1988). New arrangements need to be made when children are sick, when the caregiver is unavailable, when a parent has to go out of town, when a work shift changes and when the school year ends. All these factors complicate the logistics of parenting and working.

Strategies for Managing Work/Family Conflicts

Fearing that their children are not adequately cared for weighs heavily on the minds of many working parents. Especially mothers spend portions of their work day phoning to check on

their children or lowering their productivity through worrying. Galinsky, Hughes and Shinn (1986) found that among parents with children under six, 68 percent of mothers and 51 percent of fathers said that they experienced some or a great deal of interference between work and family life. In a Toronto study, Michelson (1985) found that 37 percent of mothers with full-time jobs said that they felt conflict quite often or very often between being a mother and having a job. However, parents have developed strategies for managing work/family conflicts (Everetts, 1988), although each strategy has negative consequences for parents, families or society.

A prevalent strategy is part-time work while children are preschoolers. This is essentially a women's solution, however, as 88 percent of part-timers in their prime working years (25-54) are women (Statistics Canada, 1988). The inequalities of wages and benefits between part-time and full-time workers have been noted by numerous researchers as the proportion of part-time workers has increased and unemployment rates have risen.

A second strategy for managing work/family conflicts is to choose work which can be obtained or left easily. Again, this has been primarily a woman's solution enabling mothers to leave their jobs, stay home until their children attend day care or school, and then re-enter the labour force. Women have tended to work in "pink collar ghettos" which have allowed maximum flexibility to move in and out of the labour force. However, they have done this at an economic cost, as these jobs tend to be non-unionized, low-

paid and involve little occupational mobility (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1984). Furthermore, re-entering the labour force is becoming more difficult as employers can easily obtain replacements, educational or skill requirements are rising, and workplace automation is rendering positions obsolete. In addition, women re-entering the workforce are often expected to start at the bottom of the hierarchy each time they return. Counsellors are now encouraging women to raise their aspirations and enter higher-paid "non-traditional" occupations. When they find such work, however, they often discover that union contracts and legislation ensuring maternity leave and leave for family responsibilities do not fully compensate for problems which arise from having a demanding job and maintaining responsibility for raising children.

A third strategy to manage work/family conflict is to work at home. For example, immigrant women with language problems have sought piece work at home in order to combine paid work and child care, but this kind of work tends to be low-paid without protective labour laws or fringe benefits (Johnson and Johnson, 1982). A more middle-class type of home work is consulting. With computers, modems, fax machines, telephones and lay-offs, working at home as a consultant is becoming increasing prevalent. Yet, consulting depends on continual entrepreneurial activity to find clients, it tends to be financially insecure work with few fringe benefits, and can be socially isolating.

A fourth strategy to manage work/family conflicts is shift work which always enables one parent to care for the children. Although this eliminates the need for non-family child care, the marital relationship often suffers from lack of time together. Nor can parents and children go out together as a family (Lero and Kyle, 1991:38).

A fifth strategy to manage work/family conflict is to continue with full-time work, but reduce time spent sleeping or in leisure activities. In Michelson's Toronto study (1985), women who worked full-time reported fewer hours spent in sleep and leisure activities than men or women working part-time. Yet a continuation of this pattern could lead to stress-related illness or at least intense dissatisfaction.

A sixth strategy is to reorganize gender roles to share housework and child care more equitably. Although this would assist women to compete in the labour force, it could reduce men's leisure time and disadvantaged men whose employers or co-workers are unsympathetic to gender equality. Only a small minority of couples share the responsibility of domestic labour, and these are often university-educated professional people.

A seventh strategy to alleviate "role strain" is to have no children or fewer children (Jones, Marsden and Tepperman, 1990: 19). In fact, there is a definite correlation between mothers entering the paid workforce and decline in birth rates of most industrialized countries. This trend has become a concern to

governments because of population decline and future population aging leading to potential funding problems for social programs.

Policies to Alleviate Work/Family Conflict

Studies of policies to alleviate work/family conflict often focus on family-related leave negotiated by labour unions or provided through legislation. The federal government has recently amended the Unemployment Insurance Act to create ten weeks of parental leave for either parent at child birth, to be added to the existing 15 weeks of maternity benefits. Although parental leave is important, we also need leave for children's illness and for employees with frail elderly parents or disabled adults. At the present time, many employees take their own sick leave or vacation to cover family illness.

Comparisons between Canada's leave policies and those of other nations usually indicate that Sweden and other Nordic countries are far ahead of Canada in terms of allowing employees to take time off work for child birth or other family responsibilities (Townson, 1988). Cross-national comparisons also examine state subsidies for child care or the actual provision of services. Although Sweden enjoys publicly-funded day care and generous parental leave by Canadian standards, the Swedish system is not without problems. Taxes are very high by North American standards. There is still a discrepancy between the average wages of men and women, even with public support for childbearing and childrearing. In addition, some child psychologists have

questioned the wisdom of extensive use of day care centres for young children. Furthermore, men are still less involved than women in child care even when paid leave is available. For example, one study found that only 25 percent of Swedish men eligible for parental leave took more than one month off compared to 99 per cent of women (Widerberg, 1987). Men did not take their full leave because their wives often preferred to take maximum leave to breastfeed and recover from childbirth, but men also felt that they could not leave work for an extended period without negative consequences. The authors of this study were concerned that extended family leave will be used against women employees if it remains an option used mainly by women. These continuing problems suggest that public policies attempting to eliminate work/family conflicts have not been entirely successful in equalizing family or work roles for men and women in Sweden. Yet in comparison with Canada, Sweden is well ahead.

If governments want to encourage people to have more children, they will have to create a more conducive social environment for working parents. Child care appears to be the critical concern and governments must create more subsidized child care spaces in work places, schools, community centres and licensed family homes. We also need national standards for child care in this country, as well as some assurance of quality.

Not all employers have accepted the principle that employees have legitimate reasons to vary working hours and lunch breaks. More flexible working hours would allow employees of both sexes

to deal with a variety of family responsibilities or personal business matters, as many services are open only during traditional office hours.

What happened to the idea of job sharing and work sharing? Does it really cost employers considerably more money in administrative costs to allow two people to divide a job or the work load? Especially in the present economy, employees' organizations need to spend more time and attention negotiating for changes in working hours and employment leave rather than higher wages.

Governments could also increase tax credits for families with dependent children, perhaps by removing deductions for certain business expenses or even the credit for dependent spouses. We need a caregivers' tax credit (refundable) for parents looking after their own children as well as people caring for disabled or frail adults. Although the value of Family Allowances has been eroded, I believe that we need a universal benefit to emphasize the social importance of childbearing and childrearing.

In addition to government policies, we need to encourage workplace practices which acknowledge that employees have personal lives. For example, employees should not be expected to work overtime without their consent or without adequate notice to arrange child care. Meetings should not start before the usual beginning of the work day, or continue later than usual without time to make alternate arrangements. Furthermore, employees

should be allowed to take shorter lunch breaks if they need to leave work early.

Lastly, couples need to be encouraged to redefine their gender roles in order to share parenting and housework. In fact, we all need to redefine our priorities to place more emphasis on equity and nurturing.

Conclusion

As more women enter the labour force, the dichotomy between work and private life becomes blurred. People cannot shed their personal concerns at the office or factory door when they are responsible for young children or frail parents, despite the expectations of employers. Although some work/family conflict is inevitable in societies which emphasize profit-making and consumerism, this conflict can be reduced by legislative changes, and workplace and family negotiations.

Many of these suggested reforms, however, entail such politically unfeasible alternatives as tax increases, higher employer costs or shifts in government priorities. In this economic climate, employers are more concerned with staying in business than assisting employees to combine work and family life, and governments are cutting programs and worrying about the deficit. This means that unions and employees' associations will have to negotiate leave packages or flexible hours instead of higher wages. Furthermore, voters will have to make their MPs

aware of the extent of work/family conflicts and the consequences of not dealing with them.

It is my belief that we cannot afford to ignore these conflicts because the cost is too high. Birth rates will continue to fall if combining paid work and childbearing is too difficult. Employment equity for women will remain an impossible dream, despite legislative changes. Furthermore, children of working parents could suffer from years of inadequate care. We cannot continue to give lip-service to the idea that "children are our greatest future resource" without attempting to resolve some of these issues.

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